

Appleby Archaeology Group

David Shotter of Lancaster University had a very attentive audience when he spoke to the Group on the Romans in Cumbria. From the vast amount of information that could be covered he selected as his theme the frontier and its hinterland. The talk was illustrated by slides and made more intriguing by Dr Shotter's knowledge of recent finds and current thinking. He stressed that we were now closer to the people than we were with much personal detail coming from such artefacts as the writing tablets found at Vindolanda.

It is difficult to do full justice to the detail that Dr Shotter gave us but I have tried to summarise the main areas.

In AD 70 Vespasian became emperor. He was not an aristocrat but had won the right to rule from his success in war, and he had a point to prove. He saw that as the conquest of the north, Scotland and Ireland to form a Northern Province. Tacitus gives much of the credit to Agricola but as Dr Shotter reminded us Agricola was Tacitus' father-in-law!

The advances northwards came from two directions the earlier advance was from York across the Pennines followed by an advance from Chester across the Lancashire plain to the Lune and Eden Valleys. They linked at Brougham, an important and wealthy place at the time, and then moved north to Carlisle. Marching forts at Tebay and at Rey Cross are evidence of these approaches. Timbers found at Carlisle have been dated as being felled in the autumn of 79 and tie in with its conquest by Petillius Cerealias and the subsequent building of a timber fort.

Vespasian's dream died with him in 79. There were advances after this into Scotland but by the late 80s the Romans had withdrawn and established a frontier, of a palisade and ditch along the road from Corbridge to Carlisle known as the Stanegate. There were large forts along its length including one at Vindolanda. Later the forts were reduced in size and fortlets and watch towers built. The frontier was extended westwards to Kirkbride and eastwards to South Shields. Frontier life was not without its comforts. Tablets record that seventeen men came from Carlisle to build baths at Vndolanda in 100.

Beyond the frontier the hinterland developed as the Romans consolidated their hold on the area. To the south a network of roads was constructed and forts were built including Ravenglass, one of the last to be built, and Hardnott. The fort at Ambleside had a large civilian settlement and nearby a massive storage area where goods, perhaps brought by water, were stored before being moved on.

By the second decade of the second century there was unrest, the trouble makers were probably the Novantae from the north west. A tomb stone of some one killed in the wars of 118 was found at Vindolanda and coins dated to 119 indicate a Roman victory.

Hadrian, the then emperor, decided to build a frontier from the Tyne to the Solway, initially of turf at the western end and stone at the eastern end, Hadrian wanted a symbol of the Roman Empire and a monument to himself and ordered a stone wall throughout, the only stone wall frontier in the Empire. What would he have made of it being a World Heritage Site? An excavation at Byker in 1997 found 3 rows of post holes between the wall and the ditch, and it is thought this might be the Roman equivalent of barbed wire with the space between the posts was

filled with thorny materials such as bramble. Will this be found all along the wall?. The last act in building was to replace the turf wall and by 138, the end of Hadrian's reign, that had been achieved. The wall did not stop people crossing but did ensure that they were supervised so that no undesirables could get across and those who did could be taxed. The money taken was ring fenced and used for the purchase of land for demobilised soldiers, the milecastles acting as fortified gateways.

A system of fortlets and watch towers extended the defences along the coast beyond Bowness-on-Solway at least as far as Cardurnock.⁷ Ariel photographs show a number of linear features which suggest that the coastal fortifications were linked by roads ditches and a palisade to protect the coast and the good agricultural land in the vicinity.

Roman policy was to devolve the provincial administration as soon as possible to loyal locals. The main centre of government administered by the local tribe, the Carvetii, was at Carlisle. Over time a Romano-British culture developed and by the 4th century there are signs that the commanding officers' houses at the forts became the places where local administrators held court. As the central administration from Rome broke down these local administrators became "warlords" exacting taxes and protecting the local farmers in exchange for their defence against those who were beginning to invade Britain.

Dr Shotter concluded by saying that the area was probably more densely populated before and during the Romano-British period than had previously been thought. He gave as evidence the number of Romano-British settlements that could be identified above Kirby Lonsdale, and the settlements at Ewe Close and on Stainmore.